A survey of animal welfare experts and practicing veterinarians to identify and explore key factors thought to influence canine and feline welfare in relation to veterinary care

LC Dawson, CE Dewey, EA Stone, MT Guerin and LNiel*

Ontario Veterinary College, University of Guelph, 50 Stone Rd E, Guelph, ON, N1G 2W1, Canada

* Contact for correspondence and requests for reprints: niell@uoguelph.ca

Abstract

Veterinary care is important for maintaining companion animal health; however, it also has the potential to impact other aspects of patient welfare. To investigate factors related to veterinary care that are likely to influence canine and feline welfare, animal welfare researchers, veterinarians with an expertise in animal welfare, and Canadian and American companion and mixed animal veterinarians were invited to participate in a three-stage online survey. Participants were asked to do the following: i) identify factors related to the veterinary experience that impact patient welfare; ii) rate the relative impact of each factor; and iii) gauge the feasibility of measuring and improving each factor. Overall, 78 participants identified 85 factors that impact animal welfare in the clinic (eg restraint techniques) and home environment (eg advice regarding behaviour and training). Among factors, seven themes emerged: physical environment of the clinic; routine animal care provided by veterinary team members (eg staff); interactions between the patient, staff, and client; clinic management; medical and surgical procedures; staff attitudes and education; and communication between the veterinarian and client. Mean relative impact scores ranged from 1.0 to 3.8 on a five-point scale (0–4), with 70% of factors receiving a score greater than 3. Most participants (> 80%) agreed that 68% of the identified factors could be feasibly improved in an average veterinary clinic and that 43% of the factors could be feasibly measured during a welfare assessment. These results identify key areas where veterinary care may impact the welfare of canine and feline patients and highlight priority areas where assessment and improvement are possible.

Keywords: animal welfare, assessment, cat, companion animal, dog, veterinary practice

Introduction

Regular veterinary care is widely recognised as an integral part of ensuring the health of companion animals which, in turn, can positively impact their welfare through the prevention and treatment of injury and disease. In addition, veterinary care has the potential to positively impact other aspects of patients’ overall welfare. For example, veterinarians are a reliable source of knowledge about animal care for owners, and often provide general advice about topics that are important to an animal’s well-being, such as appropriate training, exercise, and nutrition. In fact, a survey of stakeholders in the education, industry, government, charity, and veterinary sectors in Great Britain revealed that out of the 31 factors suggested to positively enhance canine welfare, access to and quality of veterinary care was the most commonly cited factor (Buckland et al 2013).

Although veterinary care has obvious positive impacts on animal welfare, it can also have negative effects. Veterinary visits are often a stressful experience for dogs and cats; they usually involve entering a new environment, interacting with unfamiliar animals and people in unusual ways, and undergoing procedures that may be painful. These experiences might even lead to the development of a conditioned avoidance response to the clinic environment (Vollmer 1977; Beaver 1999). Stanford (1981) noted that 70% of healthy dogs visiting a veterinary clinic for routine wellness examinations were reluctant to enter the clinic. Glardon et al (2010) observed that 37% of dogs and 42% of cats were generally categorised as reserved, fearful, or agitated during routine physical examinations. Döring et al (2009) reported that 78% of dogs undergoing a routine physical examination were considered to be fearful based on defined behavioural parameters, including lowered tail and body posture, trembling, fixated staring, and avoidance behaviours. Moreover, 80% of healthy dogs waiting to undergo a routine ovariohysterectomy exhibited signs of stress in their cage, such as panting and displacement behaviours (Väisänen et al 2005). Puppies between eight and 16 weeks of age showed similar signs of stress at the veterinary clinic, with 62% performing lip licking and 19% yawning while being examined on a table, and 24% panting during manipulations and restraint on the floor (Godbout et al 2007).

Beyond the effect on the patient, a negative experience at the veterinary clinic can also compromise the safety of all veteri-